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Film as a Subversive Art by Amos Vogel

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is the problem of most books about films, and no solution is in sight, but unlike books about feature film-making, one is seldom concerned with descriptions of formal aesthetic qualities of the films. The excitement and attraction is in the description of their content.

—HENRY BREITROSE

### FILM AS A SUBVERSIVE ART

By Amos Vogel. New York: Random House, 1974. \$15.00.

There's no doubt about it: Amos Vogel sees more films than anybody. In his capacity as founder of Cinema 16, an enormously successful and long-lived film society in New York, then as director of the New York Film Festival, as a distributor with Grove Press Films, and lately as a professor at Harvard and the Annenberg School in Philadelphia, he has had the energy and devotion to seek out films many of us only hear about secondhand. His book treats film as "subversive" in a catholic sense: political, moral, sexual, aesthetic, etc. Like the programs Vogel has presented for so many years, the book has something for the delectation of every taste, and either browsing through it or reading it straightaway will remind you of many extraordinary films—ones you have seen and half forgotten, ones you should have seen and missed, and most of all films you have never heard of and wish you could see. Vogel is indefatigable. He tells you about a Chinese documentary on surgical acupuncture, about an American sex comedy called *Electrosex* ("a sombre subversion of the genre"), about the Italian outrages of Carmelo Bene, about Donald Richie's incredible *Cybele*, and about the utterly beyond-all-taboo works of Otto Muehl (whose group we see, behaving rather decorously by their standards, in Makavejev's *Sweet Movie*). Vogel's descriptions are generally brief—I would guess that the book had its origins in the enticing program notes he has compiled over the years—but he is drawn into lengthier discussions about such matters as the undeserved reputation of *Last Tango* as a "sexual breakthrough," or the question of *Triumph of the Will*—which he admits must be included as "subversive" as well as "profoundly danger-

ous" for its fascist content; he is particularly interested in the achievements of Makavejev and the Czechs. Vogel has organized the vast mass of films he describes (which includes "standard" items as well as the more esoteric) by adopting a chapter scheme that makes good sense in the historical sections but inevitably bursts at the seams when it comes to more contemporary work: how can we really distinguish "the subversion of content" from "forbidden subjects of the cinema"? But the divisions mostly work well enough in practice, and the general discussions that introduce the various sections integrate the films discussed through larger stylistic, political, and philosophic analyses. (Each of these introductory sections offers a reading list for further exploration of the issues raised; this, and the excellent indexing to the book, give it lasting value for any serious film student. It is perhaps worth mentioning also, at this point when many potential buyers are finding book prices uncomfortably high, that the price of this volume is very reasonable, considering the steep rises in paper and printing costs over the past year or so, for a book of 336 double-column pages and 300 illustrations.)

A careless browser might put the book down as merely sensational because of its illustrations, which are often quite weird. That would be a mistake. Vogel has a sophisticated and humane approach to his subject, and a political background that has a way of putting films into useful new perspectives. He begins his note on *I Am Curious—Yellow* thus: "The historical task of the leadership, said Rosa Luxemburg, is to make itself unnecessary. This is precisely what happened to this legendary, much-maligned work." He is deeply and personally concerned about the limitations on personal filmic expression in so-called socialist countries. He knows, above all, that film works as no other art can quite do upon the nonverbal recesses of our systems, which is why it has such power to outrage and shock when it presents taboo subject matter; and this makes the process somehow very touching and precious. (Though often humorous as well—I think for example of the illustration showing James Broughton directing

*The Golden Positions*: he is demonstrating a golf stroke to a plumpish woman, who is nude except for cap and shoes.) It is also, as Vogel points out, unending; for the subverters may obtain power, political or artistic, and they will then be subverted in turn. This book, then, is as much an incitement to the spirit of rebellion as it is a monument to the films that spirit has produced.

—E. C.

### THE ART OF THE AMERICAN FILM 1900-1971

By Charles Higham. Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1973. \$12.50.

The American cinema is a vast and elusive subject for the film historian. By all indications, there are more noteworthy films and film-makers in it than in any other national cinema, more perhaps than in all of the rest of world cinema. And yet the criticism in the field sometimes seems a veritable jungle: few if any of the film-makers have secure reputations, critically or otherwise; critics' preferences vary wildly; aesthetic and intellectual issues are often blurred by highly subjective reactions to all the things that "Hollywood" and "the movies" mean for various segments and generations of Western culture; the mass cultural considerations of the studio system raise complex questions about authorship and artistic integrity; sheer abundance of films and limited access to key works make full assessment of the field a gargantuan task; and despite the recent profusion of criticism in the area, it's still an open question as to how much of the American cinema ought to be taken seriously.

Just how seriously Charles Higham takes the American cinema in *The Art of the American Film 1900-1971* is, despite the ambitious title, open to debate. For, in many ways, this survey of American film is less a fresh look at the subject than a resurrection of familiar attitudes that much recent criticism has tried to transcend. Though he frequently refers to visuals, his tastes seem somewhat "literary": he shows little interest in genre films, especially westerns; he downgrades some controversial *auteurs* (most

notably Howard Hawks and Otto Preminger) and neglects several celebrated "action" directors altogether (Anthony Mann, Budd Boetticher, Don Siegel, Joseph H. Lewis, for example); and he asserts that Hollywood reached artistic maturity only after the arrival of various Broadway writers at the studios in the thirties. Among the directors he celebrates are some whose reputations have dimmed in recent years (William Wyler and Lewis Milestone in particular) and some who have received very little serious attention (Henry King, Clarence Brown, Michael Curtiz, Cecil B. DeMille, Edgar G. Ulmer, Henry Hathaway, Edmund Goulding, Tay Garnett and Victor Fleming). Still, the Higham hierarchy is fairly orthodox: Griffith, Lubitsch, von Stroheim, von Sternberg, John Ford, King Vidor, Cukor, Capra, Welles, Hitchcock and Wilder all get special attention.

Higham's prefatory remarks emphasize the collaborative nature of film-making and tend to undercut the mystique of the director-*auteur*: "It may well be argued that casting and a first-rate script are the most important ingredients of all. . . ." But he organizes his book around directors anyway and apologizes for that state of affairs with what is perhaps a better argument for the *auteur* approach than he seems to realize: "Actually the writer and cinematographer have been equally influential, but it has proved impossible to show a sustained line of thinking in the works of writers (with rare exceptions . . . ) and a book following cinematographic personal expression should be an entirely separate volume." Higham does give some credit to various art directors, cinematographers, and writers along the way; but his consistently directorial framework looks like a rather curious cop-out alongside the team spirit of his preface.

Though he claims to be concerned above all with artists and personal expression, Higham's appreciations of technique make it hard to see personal elements of any sort. There is an almost infinite distance between Higham's director-technicians ("The job of seizing the audience's attention is the director's") and the personal visions of Andrew Sarris's *auteurs*.